

AND GOD

Brazil—In a land of Biblical proportions

CREATED

divers get a Plexiglas view of Creation's

NORONHA

still-beating heart. by DAVID TAYLOR

The sun draws blood from the sky behind Cagarras Island and begins to groom that perfect crescent moon of sand called Copacabana, the world's most famous and, many say, most beautiful beach.

As I jog on the boardwalk this morning, watching the sun rise from the sea, it's hard to disagree. You got your steep green mountains rising all around you from an aquamarine sea. Across the boulevard, you got your kitschy mix of majestic hotel palaces of yesteryear rubbing shoulders with today's sleek granite towers—Carmen Miranda meets Donald Trump. Most of all, you got your people:

It's 6:00 a.m. and this boardwalk is teeming with the faithful, all dressed in the Brazilian national costume—bathing suits constructed of dental floss and your imagination. Together these middle-aged folk with mahogany-hard calves under perfect caramel tans perform the morning rituals of the Cult of Body Beautiful: roller blading, cycling, jogging, fitness walking and, of course, sunning. The young acolytes are still asleep and won't rise until after 11:00. This is summer, and Rio's nightlife is not for the faint of heart or the early riser.

But most of all, you got your legends. Just over that moun-



MOST OF FERNANDO DE NORONHA, A WATCHBAND ARCHIPELAGO 120 MILES OFF BRAZIL'S NORTHEAST COAST, IS A PROTECTED NATIONAL PARK—INCLUDING SOME OF SOUTH AMERICA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES.

Photography by CURTIS BOGGS

tain is another gorgeous beach where once strolled a girl from Ipanema. Up ahead is the ice cream-colored Copacabana Palace and the ballroom that taught the world to sway to Latin rhythms. Towering above me is Sugarloaf Mountain. And, in the distance, the statue of Christ the Redeemer standing atop Corcovado Mountain, arms opened wide to welcome saint and sinner alike to a city where the sacred and the profane embrace joyously in that slightly mad event known as Carnival.

In its dichotomies, Rio de Janeiro is a perfect symbol of Brazil, a land of operatic extremes. In wealth: from Latin America's busiest ports and mightiest industries in the south, to the gut-wrenching poverty of the north. In geography: from the teeming megalopolises of Rio and São Paulo, twice larger than any

American city, to the misty dark secrets of the Amazon. In choice: although Brazil covers nearly half of South America, 70 percent of its people crowd along a narrow strip of Atlantic coast. For in this country that boasts the world's largest wetlands—the Pantanal—the beach is still the center of life. Brazilians live for the beach. It's where everyone goes and anything goes.

No wonder scuba diving is quickly becoming a national pastime. Brazil supports three national dive magazines. And although diving goes on all up and down Brazil's 4,600 miles of coastline, there is one very special place that every Brazilian diver makes a pilgrimage to at least once: Fernando de Noronha. After four days of diving there, I left with little doubt that

Noronha's lure has much more to do with the sacred than the profane.

WHO'S ZOOMIN' WHO?

Outside the Bay of Dolphins we are waiting in our dive boat, masks on foreheads, cameras at the ready, for the afternoon show. Each day between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m., a pod of about 700 spinner dolphins leaves this sheltered bay on the main island of Fernando de Noronha, a watchband archipelago 120 miles off Brazil's northeast coast, and heads south for deep water to hunt. The next morning around 5:00, they return to their cove to rest, nurse their young, socialize and have lots of sex. They have been doing this, literally, for hundreds of years, perhaps thousands. We don't know for sure. We do know they are the oldest and largest residential school of dolphins on Earth. Only one other school is known of, in Kealahou Bay, Hawaii.

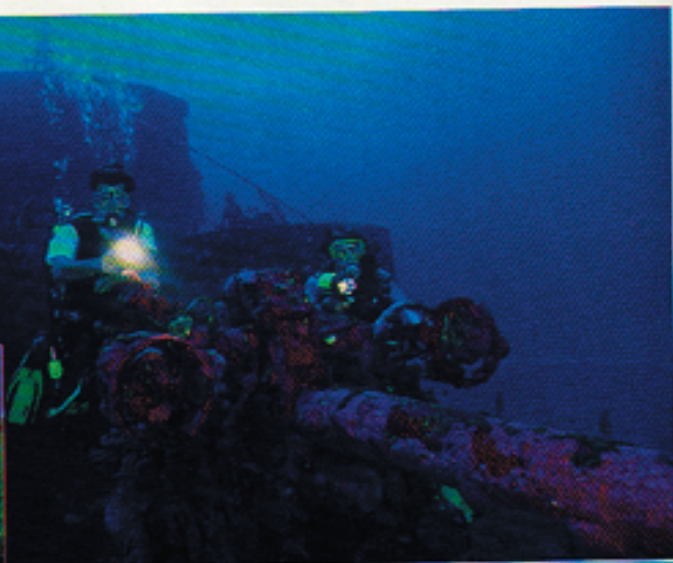
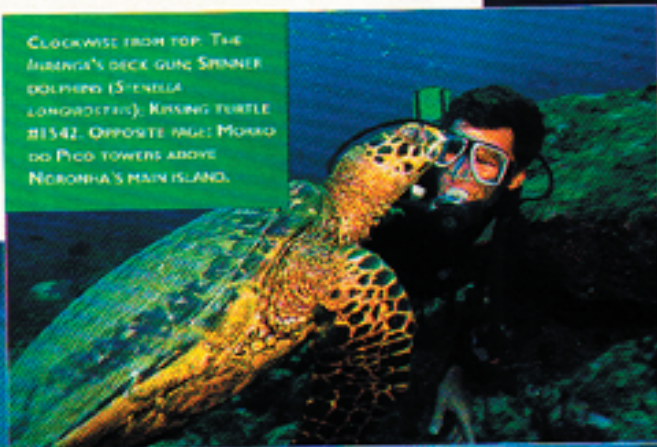
Another boat of snorkelers is doing the same as we, drifting outside the dolphins' protected cove where no boats or swimmers are allowed. We are interlopers

on a centuries-old cycle of living, dying, giving birth, passing down knowledge of the sea and the skills of hunting. Each day back and forth. A close-knit tribe of intelligent creatures oblivious to all that we consider important: war, space exploration, Madonna, political elections. The dolphins belong to this island and sea in a way we never can.

"There," someone says, pointing. At first I think it's just the wind roughing up the sea, a broad area of choppy waves being blown this way. As the waves move closer I realize they're not waves at all but hundreds of dorsal fins moving up and down, in and out of the water.

We splash in all at once and swim away from the boat. We've been told that in the afternoons the dolphins are hungry and not in the mood for curious, snorkel-huffing humans, so don't expect much. As I kick toward their clicks and squeals I focus on the 70-foot bottom. The vis is only so-so, maybe 60 feet, but suddenly I see them: a long gray line of bullet shapes moving across the bottom. As they swim past, a feeling of disbelief washes over me: I'm in the middle of a vast army of dolphins, hundreds and hundreds of them, parading behind and in front of me as far as I can see, an ocean full of them, moving purposefully, in unison.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: THE INBANGA'S DECK GUNG SPINNER DOLPHINS (STENELLA LONGIROSTRIS); KISSING TURTLE #1542. OPPOSITE PAGE: MORRO DO PICO TOWERS ABOVE NORONHA'S MAIN ISLAND.



A few break away and swim by to check us out. Up close I can see their long snouts, distinctive gray horizontal stripes and eyes full of knowing. Then they are gone. Like missiles.

ISLAND OF THE FORBIDDEN

Each day on Noronha we come to watch this spectacle. Sometimes, especially in the mornings, the dolphins stop to play—and talk. Spinner dolphins derive their common name from the ability to leap high out of the water and perform a series of spins and somersaults, often in repeated series. Besides just showing off, some biologists believe the acrobatics augment their communication system, body language with a twist.

Their message to me is clear. They are the spirit of Noronha, something mysterious and grand and wonderful beyond my comprehension—embodiments of the wild heart of nature that still beats here, visible through a Plexiglas window called a dive mask.

Incredibly, the dolphins and their bay were nearly destroyed: A decade ago the Brazilian government was considering the islands for a major tourism development. Due largely to the efforts of Russell Coffin, a Brazilian, Guy Pel-

land, a Canadian photographer, and Jack McKenney, whose film *Bay of Dolphins* helped broadcast the specialness of Noronha, the government was persuaded to declare the area a national park in 1988.

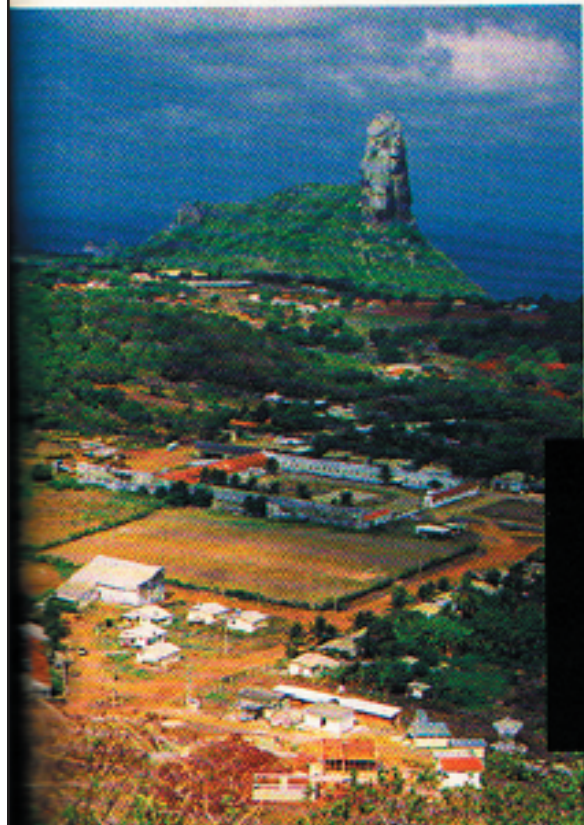
Today, nearly 70 percent of Capt. Fernando de Noronha's island (Noronha is a persistent misspelling) is a park administered by IBAMA, the Brazilian Environmental Institute, which enforces some of the world's strictest human controls.

Only 420 tourists are allowed on the island at a time. Each day 100 leave and 100 arrive. Life for the island's 2,000 permanent residents is

also touched by the hand of IBAMA. All development: forbidden. Fishing: nearly eliminated. The foods they grow, even the materials they use in refurbishing their houses—if given permission—must be approved by IBAMA. Thus the nickname, "Island of the Forbidden."

Of course, as a dive tourist whose only contact with officialdom was a serious but polite young man from IBAMA who accompanied us on one day of diving, it's easy to favor a human population being so strictly controlled. I eat their food and leave. I don't have to grow any.

But it's also clear from the Brazilian tourists I met that when they talk about Noronha, they aren't talking about only a place. For Brazilians, Noronha is also an idea, something precious and nearly sacred to them, with a mystique all its own. And for divers, it has one helluva payoff.



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